

Tigers Stripes

The Newsletter of the

Mayo Smith Society

Vol. 30, No. 9

Tigers Fans Who Always Care

November 2014

EXTREMES – By David Raglin

The Detroit Tigers won 90 games in 2014. That's pretty good, yet if you read many of the blogs, online postings, sportswriter commentary, not to mention the fans at Comerica Park, it seems like it was a much worse season. As positive as I try to be, there were times I was really down on the 2014 Detroit Tigers -- a team that went 90-72. Why did we feel this way? It was not just the sweep in the American League Division Series at the hands of the Baltimore Orioles. That series just added to the angst that was already there.

Part of it is life in the era of the Internet, where we can rile each up into a frenzy whenever the manager or general manager or a player does something we feel is wrong. Part of it is the gobs of information that is available to us that help us show that we were right. That is not all of it, though. Part of it was the uniqueness of the 2014 Detroit Tigers and the era of Tigers baseball we live in.

Since the Tigers' resurgence in 2006, the Tigers have the third best record in the American League, averaging almost 88 wins a season. They have won two American League pennants, four American League Central Division championships in a row, made baseball's final four in four seasons, and been in the playoffs five times. But, they have not won a World Series. Tigers fans are very aware of this, and of the fact that owner Mike Ilitch has been sparing little expense in trying to win a world championship.

Part of it is, I think that the 2014 Detroit Tigers were a team of extremes. Remember the feeling when the Tigers got David Price—the Tigers had the past THREE CY YOUNG WINNERS in their rotation. How could they lose to the Orioles with such great pitchers? Fangraphs, a respected sabermetric website, going into the postseason had the Tigers as the favorites to win the AL pennant, and the Orioles with lower odds of winning the Series than the Oakland A's, a wild-card team having to play a one-and-done playoff game.

At the plate, the Tigers had the best middle of the order in the league. Their number three, four and five hitters, mostly Miggy and the Martinezes (hey, that'd be a great name for a band...), had 370 runs created and 7.2 runs created per game (actually, per 27 outs, a game's worth of outs). A team made up of those three batters repeating each other three times in the order would score 7.2 runs per game in a league that had 4.2 runs per game. The second best 3-4-5 combo, Toronto, was well behind with only 310 runs created and 5.8 runs created per game. On the other hand, the Tigers' six through nine hitters were 11th in the league with 246 runs created and 3.5 runs created per game.

The Tigers were second in the AL with 757 runs, 4.7 per game, but it was not as good as it sounds. If the middle of the order was not hitting, they did not score. The bottom of the order (and at times, the top, too) did not contribute much. Game 1 against Baltimore was an example -- until the ninth inning, when the game was essentially over, the Tigers had three runs, all on solo homers by, you guessed it, Miggy and the Martinezes.

The thinness of the team showed through when we reached the ends of Games 2 and 3 versus Baltimore. When they needed a righthanded hitter to hit for the lefty Alex Avila, the choice was backup catcher Bryan Holiday, who hit .231 with sub .300 on-base and slugging percentages. In Game 3, with the tying runner on second and one out, Hernan Perez, who spent most of the season in Toledo and had only played eight games for the Tigers, was the option.

The defense had their extremes too. Ian Kinsler was fourth in the American League in runs saved according to Baseball Info Systems at a +20 (compared to an average player). On the other hand, Nick Castellanos was the worst defensive player in the league at -30 and Torii Hunter was fourth worst at -18.

The Tigers had the three Cy Young winners but were actually 10th in the league in ERA among starters, due in part to Justin Verlander's problems but also in part to the spot starters (they guys other than Scherzer, Verlander, Sanchez, Porcello, Smyly and Price). The five other starters (Robbie Ray, Kyle Lobstein, Buck

Farmer, Kyle Ryan, and Drew VerHagen) started 16 games and went 3-8 with a 6.16 ERA. The bullpen, well, we don't have to talk about that; it was a disaster with the third-worst ERA in the league and untold heartaches.

Even Dave Dombrowski was a man of extremes. Where would the Tigers have been without the brilliant trade of Prince Fielder for Ian Kinsler, and J.D. Martinez has to be the best scrapheap pickup of the season. On the other hand, maybe Robbie Ray will prove his worth, but the Doug Fister trade was a disaster for the 2014 Tigers. Not just because Ray pitched so badly – nobody had a right to think he could pitch in the majors in 2014 – but the other two players, reliever Ian Krol and infielder Steve Lombardozzi, were expected to provide needed depth but when the season ended, neither were Tigers.

OK, I think I've made the point about extremes. How that links to fan attitudes is that it is easy to say, "With the last three Cy Young Award winners and the last three league MVPs, and one of the best hitters in the league in Victor Martinez, how can we lose?" We can say, if only we had a bullpen, or some bats off the bench, or anything else, we'd be the best team in baseball. We all do that; I was at the SABR (Society of American Baseball Research) convention when the Tigers got David Price. I was elated, and the other SABR members, all very knowledgeable baseball fans, were slapping me on the back and congratulating me and other Tigers fans.

The good news is that even getting some average players to replace the mediocre ones would improve the team greatly. It's harder to improve a team with a bunch of OK players because it takes a great player to really help make the team much better. It will be a challenging offseason for the Tigers, with having to re-sign or replace Victor Martinez and finding bullpen help, lefthanded hitting, and two-thirds of an outfield.

IT'S KING TIGER TIME AGAIN – by Mark Pattison

With Detroit's season now entirely in the rearview mirror, voting is now open for King Tiger for 2014. As has been the Society's custom for more than a decade, Smithers vote for the Tiger they think best exemplifies the qualities of King Tiger by virtue of both his on-the-field and off-the-field performance. It is not meant for the best player or the team MVP necessarily. It is for the player whom you feel best captures the Tiger spirit and what it means to be a Detroit Tiger.

The rules are pretty simple: One vote per member. No split votes. No multiple votes. Entries must be received, either by email or postal mail, no later than Monday, Dec. 1. The email address to use is Pattison_mark@hotmail.com; the postal address to use is Mark Pattison, 1221 Floral St. NW, Washington, DC 20012. When you vote, feel free to describe the qualities you found in your choice. We like to excerpt from them when we announce the winner.

The history of King Tiger shows that it's OK for repeat winners: 2004, Carlos Guillen and Ivan Rodriguez; 2005, Placido Polanco; 2006, Kenny Rogers; 2007, Magglio Ordonez; 2008, Miguel Cabrera; 2009, Justin Verlander; 2010, Miguel Cabrera; 2011, Justin Verlander; 2012, Miguel Cabrera; 2013, Max Scherzer.

If there is a sticking point for voters, it can be that they don't always know about the off-the-field activities of their favorite Tigers, be it in the clubhouse or in the community. We admit that it can be a problem, but we do our best to cite examples of selfless service. In fact, here are some. Not that we're endorsing anyone in particular, but if you scratch beneath the surface you may be able to find something beyond just the stats that justifies your hero worship.

Ian Kinsler and wife Tess partnered with the Detroit Tigers Foundation to host deserving children and families in their personal luxury suite throughout the season. Children and families were identified by local charitable organizations including Children's Hospital of Michigan and The Children's Center.

Joe Nathan presented a \$50,000 gift to the Detroit Fire Department to support the essential needs of firefighters in the city of Detroit. The gift, made in partnership with the Detroit Tigers Foundation, was awarded in \$10,000 grants to five different neighborhood Detroit Fire Department firehouses.

Rick Porcello and the Detroit Tigers Foundation partnered with Team Joseph on a crowd-sourcing campaign to raise money for cutting-edge Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy medical research. Porcello challenged Team Joseph to raise at least \$20,000 for which he matched every donation. Since 2012, thanks to Porcello's efforts, the Strikeout Duchenne program has raised more than \$85,000.

On Aug.15, Max Scherzer and wife Erica hosted the first annual Motown Showdown charity fantasy football draft party. Scherzer and several teammates joined donors for a special draft- day event including a

stadium tour, brunch, happy hour and opportunity to watch the Tigers take batting practice from the field. Proceeds benefitted the Detroit Police Athletic League, the Detroit Zoo and Detroit Tigers Foundation.

Torii Hunter and wife Katrina, through their charitable effort, the Torii Hunter Project, funded a character-building program called Heart of a Champion, designed to reduce dropout rates and increase student performance and graduation rates. The program launched at a high-energy kickoff event on Sept. 23 and will serve 7,500 students in 39 Detroit schools.

Put your thinking caps on. Who will be King Tiger this year? We'll confer the honor before a game during the Society's Spring Training Trip in 2015. Due to the Dec. 1 deadline, you'll probably get a short note in the next issue reminding you that there's still time left to vote. But there's no time like the present!

WRITER CALLS MORRIS, TRAM, SWEET LOU HALL-WORTHY -- By Todd Miller

While vacationing this past summer in Rehoboth Beach, Del., I met veteran baseball writer Hal Bodley at a local bookstore while he was signing copies of his new book, *How Baseball Explains America*. Hal has been covering baseball since 1958. He worked for The News-Journal in Wilmington, Del., before he became the national baseball writer for USA Today at the paper's inception in 1982. He remained with USA Today until joining MLB.com in 2007.

For nearly 30 years, Hal voted for Hall of Famers by virtue of belonging to the Baseball Writers Association of America – an affiliation he had to end upon becoming an employee of Major League Baseball. During the book signing, I asked him about the probabilities of Jack Morris, Alan Trammell and Lou Whitaker receiving baseball's highest honor.

Replied Hal, "It's a shame those guys aren't in. I voted for them every year they were on the ballot, and all three of them deserve to be in the Hall."

Hal thinks Morris got short shrift because he was often rude with the media. "Jack was a fierce competitor and didn't always feel like talking," said Hal. "I've worked with him on MLB Network, and he's the nicest guy you'd ever want to meet. I'm hopeful that the Veterans Committee will vote him in." The committee will vote on Morris's candidacy in 2017; he received only 61.5 percent of the votes this year, his 15th and final time on the writers' ballot. To be inducted, a player must be named on at least 75 percent of the ballots cast.

When I asked Hal if Morris was the same type of pitcher in the 1980s that Hall of Famer Steve Carlton was in the 1970s for the Philadelphia Phillies, the team Hal covered, Hal replied, "Absolutely. They were very similar. Steve's in, and Jack should be there, too."

As for Trammell, Hal said, "I thought he was the American League's version of Ozzie Smith, and I hope he gets in. He'll probably have to wait for the Veterans Committee." Indeed, Tram and The Wizard are statistically similar. Trammell's final year on the writers' ballot is 2016, so the scribes have two more chances to do the right thing.

In 2001, The New Bill James Historical Baseball Abstract rated Trammell as the ninth-best shortstop of all time, ahead of 14 Hall of Famers.

Whitaker, Trammell's double-play partner for a major league-record 1,918 games from 1977 to 1995, did not receive the necessary five percent of the votes in his first year of Hall of Fame eligibility (2001) and was therefore not allowed to appear on ensuing writers' ballots. Next year, the Veterans Committee will consider Sweet Lou's candidacy, and Hal is "hopeful" that Whitaker will get the honor he so richly deserves, given that Lou's statistics are comparable to Ryne Sandberg and other second basemen who have plaques in Cooperstown.

To date, the only Hall of Famer among the '84 Tigers – a team that won a franchise-record 104 games -- is manager Sparky Anderson, and he chose to wear a Reds cap on his plaque because he got his managerial start in Cincinnati.

Who will be the next Tiger to follow Al Kaline into the Hall of Fame? In addition to Trammell, members of the 2015 ballot with Tigers or Michigan connections are:

- John Smoltz (1st Year) – The Detroit native who spent his youth in Lansing is a first-ballot Hall of Famer. He was a Tigers farmhand until being traded to Atlanta in July 1987 for veteran pitcher Doyle Alexander, who helped the Tigers win the AL East that year. John should join Braves teammates Greg Maddux and Tom Glavine, as well as manager Bobby Cox, in overwhelming fashion.

- Gary Sheffield (1st Year) – The nephew of ex-major league pitcher Dwight Gooden spent 2007-08 with the Tigers as a DH-OF. Because he was named in the Mitchell Report in December 2007 as a player who obtained and used steroids, his candidacy is a long shot at best despite hitting more than 500 home runs during a 22-year career.
- Jarrod Washburn (1st Year) – Finished a 12-year career with the Tigers in 2009, when he started eight games, posting a record of 1-3, 7.33 after being acquired from the Mariners. His record of 107-109, 4.10 makes 2015 the only year in which his name is likely to appear on the ballot.
- Troy Percival (1st Year) – Played briefly with the Tigers in 2005, in the middle of a 14-year career that saw the relief pitcher compile 358 saves and a career record of 35-43, 3.17, far from the greatness that Hall of Fame induction requires.
- Tony Clark (1st Year) – Began his 15-year career by spending 1996-2001 with the Tigers. His statistics of 251 home runs, 824 RBI and .262 batting average fall short of Hall of Fame standards. Tony currently heads the Major League Baseball Players Association and is the first former player to do so.

Hall of Fame induction is reserved for the top 1 percent of players who have played the game – the great ones. According to Bodley, Morris, Trammell and Whitaker were great players and should have plaques in Cooperstown. Smoltz is also part of that exclusive club, and is the only shoo-in among the eight other players discussed.

Players on the 2015 ballot who don't have Tigers or Michigan connections and should be inducted next year are Craig Biggio, Randy Johnson and Pedro Martinez. Mike Piazza and Jeff Bagwell are also eligible candidates, but their alleged steroid use is likely to derail their bids for immortality in the short term, if not forever. Borderline candidates are Don Mattingly, in his final year of eligibility, as well as Larry Walker, Edgar Martinez and Mike Mussina.

By the way, *How Baseball Explains America* (Triumph Books, \$24.95) is enlightening and entertaining read that I recommend strongly to help you get through the offseason.

SHORT STRIPES

When the Giants' Travis Ishikawa hit a three-run homer off Michael Wacha to defeat the Cardinals, 6-3, in Game 5 of the National League Championship Series and send the Giants to their third World Series in five years, he became only the fourth player to hit a pennant-clinching walk-off round-tripper in a League Championship Series game. It brought back memories of our own Magglio Ordonez, who hit a three-run blast off the A's Huston Street in Game 4 of the 2006 American League Championship Series. Others who have done it are Aaron Boone, who sent the 2003 Yankees to the Fall Classic by taking Red Sox knuckleballer Tim Lincecum deep in Game 7 and Chris Chambliss, whose solo shot off the Royals' Mark Littell in the deciding Game 5 of the 1976 American League Championship Series gave the Yankees their first pennant in 12 years. The Yankees' euphoria was short-lived as future Tigers manager Sparky Anderson's Cincinnati Reds swept ex-Tigers manager Billy Martin's Bronx Bombers.

For **Mayo Smith Society Memberships** send \$20

(US\$23 out of the US) to:

Mayo Smith Society, PO Box 119,
Northville, MI 48167

Name _____

Address _____

For **Detroit Tigers 1984: What a Start! What a Finish!** (\$20), or **Detroit Tigers Lists and More**, autographed by authors David Raglin and Mark Pattison, send to:

Mark Pattison, 1221 Floral St. NW,
Washington, DC 20012

City, St/Pr _____

Zip/Postal Code _____ Phone _____

Our shirts are now sold through the Detroit Athletic Company. To purchase a shirt, call 313/961-3550.

E-mail _____

Tigers Stripes, the official newsletter of the Mayo Smith Society, is published nine times a year. **Publisher/Society Administrator:** Todd Miller (412/848-1082, toddprmtg@verizon.net). **Editor:** Mark Pattison (202/829-9289, pattison_mark@hotmail.com). **Writer/ Sabermetrician:** David Raglin (703/556-0332 or 703/835-1198, darags@ymail.com). **Membership Services Coordinator:** Pete Wright. The Mayo Smith Society was established in 1983 by Dale Petroskey, Dennis Petroskey, and Bill Mackay.